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Survival Writing: Autobiography vs. Primatology in the Conservation Diaries of Alison Jolly

By Margaretta Jolly

Abstract

Donna Haraway's ecological visions frame this exploration of my mother Alison Jolly's writings as a primatologist of ring-tailed lemurs. My mother, I propose, chose auto/biographical modes to unsettle anthropomorphic and Western perspectives and to enhance conservation efforts in Madagascar. I find solace in this and in Haraway's ideas about survival as publisher of Mum's diaries after her death.

Donna and Mum

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway encourages us to hold together in a time of danger. The Chthulucene, Haraway explains, is an earthly time when human and nonhuman must develop new ways of imagining life beyond a species competition where humans crush everyone else. Her most provocative example is biological: the bacteria that live in symbiogenetic, collective, coevolutionary forms. Infection as coevolution isn't nice, of course, and "symbiosis is not a synonym for mutually beneficial."¹ In celebrating complex biological systems in this way, Haraway challenges us to rethink individuality as a safe haven. This applies to art too: we need stories that make sym-poietic thinking and action. It is my pleasure that she chose as one of her examples the Ako series for Malagasy children by my mother, Alison Jolly, cowritten with the Malagasy biologist Hanta Rasamimanana, simple but scientifically accurate stories about lemurs growing up alongside humans.²

Donna previously wrote about Mum as one of the primatologists at whom she peered through her critical binoculars in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. Mum, reviewing the book in 1990, was outraged that Donna seemed to miss the scientific point: subjectivity can be overcome if enough scientists collaborate.³ But she relished telling me about this quirky, brilliant woman she met at the first women-only primatologists conference in 1990.⁴ Later, Mum felt “flattered by every word.”⁵ She would have enjoyed being touched again by Donna’s gracious hand. Much more would she have rejoiced in Donna’s symbiotic biology, to hear the environmental story recognized as the fundamental life story, a battle line in which it isn’t humans versus animals but everybody versus the rocks.

I draw on Donna’s call to imagine the Chthulucene in the following reflections on my mother as a primatologist who used diaries to bring readers’ attention to the plight of the people, animals, and plants of Madagascar. But in exploring the politics of life writing when animal lives take center stage, I tangle with my mother’s legacy as her daughter and literary executor, and the personal dimension of this particular survival story.

Honoring the Bequest

Alison Jolly was a primatologist who studied the lemurs of Madagascar, beginning fieldwork there in 1962. Aged twenty-five, she had completed a doctorate at Yale on the evolutionary significance of the hand in lower primates. Observing lemurs in the wild, she analyzed the way that hands, noses, teeth, and legs were used in the “friendly behavior” of contact, grooming, and play as well as feeding, sex, and fighting. She concluded that “primate society preceded the growth of primate intelligence, made it possible, and determined its nature.”⁶ Laying out her ideas in a breakthrough article published in *Science* in 1966, her belief that evolution

evolved from social intelligence rather than the mastery of tools anticipated a paradigm shift in biology.

Of course, I and my three siblings knew her mostly as Mum -- clever, self-possessed, who liked writing more than chatting. These elements merged after she died from cancer in 2014, leaving her conservation diaries to me. No celebrity, my mother was yet an engaged academic and public commentator who was partly responsible for the ring-tailed lemur becoming the symbol of Madagascar, awakening interest in the incredible biodiversity of this huge island off the coast of South Africa.

For this reason, her death in 2014 became obituarized—carried in part by a photograph of a magical moment when a troop of lemurs advanced toward her along the branch of a giant tamarind tree at Berenty, her research site. Thus our private mourning is entwined with a wider life-and-death story that mingles questions of species survival, postcolonial and posthuman politics, and my daughterly love and pride. My mother’s bequest to me of her “Mad” diaries and her wish that they be published is also part of this story, and it was my bittersweet pleasure to launch the book, *Thank You, Madagascar: The Conservation Diaries of Alison Jolly*, a year later.

Image 1 Alison Jolly with ringtails, 2005, courtesy Cyril Ruoso

For a life-writing scholar, all of this personalizes academic questions of how life narrative can contain and represent loss. It throws me into the common condition of inheriting “documents of life” that strangely release new life narratives.⁷ Yet as eldest daughter and academic successor, this comes with an overwhelming sense of literary obligation, tying me further in “bonds of paper, not only bonds of blood.”⁸ This adds a twist to Philippe Lejeune’s musing on the problem of how to end a diary, that the difficulty of closure measures the wish to defer its writer’s death—certainly true for me as diary editor.⁹ For my mother, I think she was also trying to defer the death of a place that is known as a unique world in its own right.

Though Mum most definitely used her last account to say her own goodbye to her beloved adopted country, she ended with a very open question: “If humanity, Malagasy and outsiders together cannot save Madagascar, what hope is there to save the planet?”¹⁰

Biodiversity in the Balance

It was not just lemurs’ survival that drove her diary writing, although they are “critically endangered” and, like 90 percent of all species in Madagascar, endemic. In her stylish felt-tip pen, she charted the struggles of Malagasy professionals and farmers, the outsider idealists, scientists, and tourists, and the maneuverings of the World Bank, politicians, and millionaire donors. These entwine with the ongoing interests of chameleons, baobabs, birds, giant jumping rats, golden silk spiders, and luna moths, all in their own way persistently doing their bit to get a piece of land, to preserve their families and descendants.

One of the most challenging chapters recounts a search for lemur traps. On the way, guided by an elderly poacher and accompanied by *National Geographic* photographer Frans Lanting, they stumbled upon a funeral procession. Of a child. One of a dozen children who had recently died, including two of the poacher’s grandchildren. Wincing while Lanting captured the story, she ends at the graveyard, a taboo place for outsiders, but is nevertheless welcomed by the villagers in their grief. Horrified, she tells the head of Amoco Oil at a party next day; a doctor is sent; the local well that infected the children is fixed. But how then to continue to the forest with the old poacher? There she imagines “how a female rufus lemur would be garrotted, dangling with broken neck from the sprung trap, her fur red in the spotted sunlight and the surprised look of her white eyebrows now set in the surprise of death. Or worse, a male caught round the waist, screaming small lemur screams until the old man walked back to finish him off—or the crows and kites got there first.”¹¹

Whose deaths matter more? Lemurs or human children? Mum was the American mediator, the *mama vazaha*, with the pink lipstick, Tilly bush-hat, and outsized sneakers, seemingly trusted by everyone because she had gone there over fifty years. Mum never failed to appreciate the lovely capital city, Antananarivo, the elegant Indonesian African culture, the cork tree carvings and vanilla, just as much as the housecat-sized chameleons, comet orchids, and giant exploding palm trees. But her diaries depict a clash of attitudes toward nature. Is it a heritage of the world? An economic resource to pillage? Or a legacy of people's ancestors, bequeathed to serve the needs of their descendants? This is what in Malagasy is known as *tannin-drazana*, *terre des ancêtres*, or *tannin-ny taranka*, *terre des descendants*. And although she suggests that this view—often held by the poor—can't be the only answer, biodiversity depends on respecting it. "Even counting an old hunter's time as worth nothing, the effort can hardly be worth the meager return in protein. People just like to hunt. The incalculable part is finding your lemur troop and learning its routes. This season is the *soudure*, the hungry season between harvests for lemurs as for humans. There is almost no fruit left, and no new growth. The rufus lemurs react by doing nothing all day, and sortie-ing for an hour or so at dawn and dusk. This means your watching must be only at dawn and dusk. And the region is 10 kilometers from the old poacher's home!"¹²

Alison Richard, another lemur specialist, considers *Thank You, Madagascar* to be the darkest of Mum's three auto/biographical conservation accounts.¹³ The first, *A World Like Our Own*, sought to open up the beauty of the country, its species, and its local experts when decolonization and a Russian-backed dictatorship had virtually closed it to scientists. The second, *Lords and Lemurs*, went into history to reveal the interdependence of animals, Malagasy, French, Americans. She explained how "her" lemur reserve at Berenty had come into being as a privately owned concession of French colonial farmers on the lands of the Tandroy people, controversially defending the de Heaulme family, who maintain it still today.

Written on the curve of what became an incredible lobby for investment in Madagascar's biodiversity, she was optimistic, and in 2001, a new president, Marc Ravalomanana, made an extraordinary pledge: to give six million hectares—ten percent of the land surface—to nature reserves, in exchange for writing off half of the country's debt to the World Bank.¹⁴

Her third and last book, though, *Thank You, Madagascar*, charts the tragic collapse of this vision of development, derailed by a political coup in 2009. Corruption, instability, the ongoing rivalry of French and American interests joined now by Chinese investors, and, in particular, rapacious international logging and mining industries are wrecking Madagascar's fragile environmental governance. At the same time, biodiversity has become a business, a discourse and trade that offers real but perhaps false hope to Malagasy biologists, students, guides, hoteliers, taxi drivers, roadside stall holders, engineers, and entrepreneurs. And to lemurs, though I suppose they know this very differently, through depletion of food, the loss of habitat, the failure of their children.

Mediating Madagascar

Of course, millions know of the country through the candy-colored Disney film of 2005—the tale of four spoiled animals from New York's Central Park Zoo, who, as the strapline has it, escape to “find themselves in Madagascar, among a bunch of merry lemurs.”¹⁵ Mum recorded meeting the CEO of DreamWorks, Jeffrey Katzenberg, in Berenty in 2004, noting that he was “amazingly ordinary in looks and manner—a middle-aged, trim, bald man in white T-shirt and grey shorts, with totally forthright and low-key manner. The old primate rule: secure dominants never have to act dominant.”¹⁶ The film's biological wrongness is capped by the fact that ring-tailed lemurs are *female* dominant, as my mother revealed through her fieldwork in the 60s. So

the “king of the lemurs” ought to have been a “queen.” Mum “rather sourly” pointed this out to Katzenberg, who simply said, “That boat has already left.”¹⁷

Doubtless the entertainment industry, in nature documentaries even more than cartoons, has played its part in the mediation of lemur lives—and the marginalization of human Malagasy. Again, Mum was hardly naive. Consider her description in 1987, when she led eighteen American would-be donors to Perinet, where the sight of lemurs is guaranteed for the not-so-hardy tourist. As she noted, “funding for all the next steps in Madagascar’s conservation hung on whether the assembled millionaires were enchanted or repulsed by Madagascar.”¹⁸ Eventually they found some indrii, but the creatures simply “glance down over their long black muzzles” and refused to perform. Tired of waiting, an Italian TV presenter began a piece to camera, “Here I am all alone in the wild jungles of Madagascar. . . .”¹⁹

Almost all documentaries about ringtails are filmed in Berenty, Mum’s research site—including the British Channel 5’s *Lemur Island*, sugary animalography for which Mum was the go-to consultant, and the IMAX movie *Island of Lemurs*, narrated by Morgan Freeman, even though it was much about the Ranomafana project in a different part of the country. Why? Because the climate is lovely, the pretty forest is flat with paths swept by the people who live and work there, because there is a nice thatched restaurant serving French-Malagasy food, and mostly because lemurs are guaranteed to show up in double-quick time. But Mum welcomed the cameras and the sound recordists—with David Attenborough of course the most favored guest.²⁰ She was pragmatic, including about zoos when they worked in the interests of species’ survival. In fact, her first trip to Madagascar was sponsored by a New York Zoological Society grant.²¹ She, like the cartoon’s protagonists, was a renegade New Yorker, urbanely loving the contrast of the forest with the genteel silver and napkins of her upbringing. The issue was how to turn media interests in “leapin’ lemurs” to Madagascar’s advantage.

Mum demonstrated similar pragmatism much more controversially as an unpaid advisor on the independent biodiversity committee for a subsidiary of the mining company Rio Tinto in 2000, which was opening a titanium mine in Tôlanaro, the region of her research. She used the diaries to explain: “They have promised net positive improvement in both environment and society over the life of the mine. Much of the scrubber forest outside the conservation zone is being razed. This means they pledge to offset the damage they cause by saving other forests . . . forests in use by people, with all the negotiations and trade-offs that implies. And they have pledged to never cause the extinction of a species. (That means vertebrates and plants. We still know too little about invertebrates.)”²²

Mum knew these were stunning policy gambles, and they are tragically threatened now that Rio Tinto, under a new, hard-line chairman, is moving away from its sustainable development policy commitments.²³ But she warned, “If you think that people and forest will somehow muddle through before the hills are scraped as bare as Haiti, then there is no reason to think that money and organization will improve life. If one looks at the statistics of forest loss, one opts for the mine.”²⁴ The later part of her diaries stages these negotiations and their scary responsibilities, watching the new Business and Biodiversity Offsets Program move into the region she had known for years as the neglected South, where only small traders, ecotourists, and the abovementioned TV crews had bothered to visit. Mum’s approach was in direct contrast to that of the campaigning network Friends of the Earth, whose campaigns director, Andrew Lees, died trying to stop prospecting of this mine in 1994, apparently from heat exhaustion, having gotten lost in local woods. Lees became an environmental martyr.²⁵ Mum, struggling to Paris for her last advisory board meeting in 2013, unable to eat because of the cancer, retained her pragmatism to the end, recording in her diaries that she managed on a little whisky and a lot of hopeful conversation.

Mum's diary writing suited her wish to express the sometimes farcical and even poetic quality of conservation history's episodes, alongside the tragic drama of the whole. Moving away from her earlier field-observation-based note-taking, she embraced this most protean of forms to crisscross the human and animal worlds in copious small hardback books and later laptop entries, where lyricism and occasional light verse could flow alongside documentation. If this irreverent and various approach made her too populist for some campaigners and some biologists, it also makes plain that for her, writing went along with deeply personal pleasures of life in and through Madagascar.

The Challenge of Postcolonial Life Narrative

This autobiographical turn, however, also places Mum's writing in a genre of life narratives produced by a generation of white American women primatologists working in developing countries, most famously Dian Fossey's auto/biographical representation as "gorilla girl" and Jane Goodall's as chimpanzee champion, but we could add, in Madagascar alone, Patricia Wright, Lee Durrell, Eleanor Stirling, and Rebecca Lewis, to name but a few. These life narratives tangle with relations of decolonization, race, and gender as well as ecology. Gillian Whitlock shows us the difficult trade-offs involved, in particular how Fossey's story is read through her murder by local militia, especially with the rumor that she too at one point was caged and possibly raped by them.²⁶ This primal plot of blood sacrifice is cemented by her burial next to one of the gorillas she loved, now a shrine for eco and disaster tourists. This account, remediated many times in biographies, published letters, online discussions, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International website, and the film *Gorillas in the Mist*, starring Sigourney Weaver, has been key to the economy of affect that worries Whitlock for its unevenness in

determining what and who is recognized as “grievable life.” Fossey’s death funds the survival of endangered animals, while Congolese women are raped and killed next door.

At the heart of the Fossey legend is its vision of a transcendental bridging of the divide between human and animal, condensed in a moment of “first contact,” when a gorilla first spontaneously looks back at her and then takes her hand.²⁷ But this exchange of gazes and touch ignores the broken relationships between Africans and Westerners, black and white, as well as Tutsi and Hutu people. Haraway had already observed such ideological displacement in *Primate Visions*. Reading an iconic photograph of Goodall’s hand in the leathery clasp of a chimpanzee, used to promote Gulf Oil’s sponsorship of *National Geographic*, she asks, “how do the race, species, gender, and science codes work to reinvent nature in the Third World for First World audiences within post-colonial, multinational capitalism?” And furthermore, “when may (white) woman best represent (species) man?”²⁸ White Western women, newly liberated, ironically offer a softer touch by imperial powers after anticolonial uprisings. Whitlock adds to Haraway’s attention to how life narrative as a form becomes implicated, where its historic role in enabling claims to humanity—particularly by African American slaves—is used by primatologists now focusing on animal rights. Fossey gives the gorillas proper names, classifies them in family groups, civilizes them as “noble, loyal, and intelligent.” This makes them “bearers of the hallmarks of western individualism.” Memoir “facilitates this extraordinary auto/biographical creation.”²⁹

Haraway, however, defended my mother on this point. In *Primate Visions*, she locates my mother’s achievements in the privileges of class and race, her heterosexually conventional marriage as well as the example of her own artist mother. Yet Haraway also describes how Mum’s “hybrid arrangement” as an independent scholar and working mother depended on the “craft production” that primatology permitted in the 1960s and 70s, in contrast to the more industrialized sciences, and that Mum’s happiness with the arrangement reflected her strong

self-esteem. She also pays tribute to my mother's "polyphonic" writing, prompted by growing self-awareness to include the voices of Malagasy colleagues as well as those of the animals.³⁰ This is so from her first autobiographical book, *A World Like Our Own*, in which, for example, Mum described travelling with the botanist Rachel Rabesandratana, both leaving children with husbands, discovering similar privileges as university-educated urban women juggling kids and career.³¹ Was camping deliciously romantic (Mum)? Or dangerous and uncomfortable (Rachel)? And what did the village grandmother serving them rice think? Haraway considered that my mother had "taken a modest, concrete part" in the development of a properly local and global conversation about its many competing lives and peoples.³² Part of what permitted this was Mum's move from the third-person mode of her scientific training into the situated, autobiographical voice that she preferred from then on. She explains, "I have tried to let people of opposing viewpoints speak for themselves as the journey unfolds. This is the novelists' way of reaching a conclusion, not the scientists', but the argument seems far too important to leave to faceless statistics."³³

Nevertheless, in the context of Whitlock's illuminating critique of autobiography as itself a "soft weapon," how should we—I—think of Mum's diary and its place in the testimonial economy? Clearly, her own description of the diaries as a "frank and full" insider account, deploying her position as "eyewitness" with a "ringside seat," stakes a kind of claim. This came home as I corresponded with her colleagues after her death to find that her account was not always definitive. Catherine Corson, for example, whose academic study of the political economy of the same period positions Mum as overly optimistic.³⁴ Most obviously problematic is the representation of Malagasy people's life narratives. Mum, as said, was keen to include and eventually cede to the narratives of those who live with their unique plants and animals. Many of the key figures in her diaries are Malagasy specialists, such as Léon Rajaobelina, director of Conservation International's Madagascar branch, former government

minister, and colleague on the Biodiversity Committee. She relished telling how she met Hanta Rasamimanana, sent to spy on the strange American woman by the socialist government in the early 1980s.³⁵ She used oral histories to include the perspectives of the guides and sisal plantation workers, including Jaona Tsiminono, who briefly joined a breakaway Southern rebellion against the Northern anticolonial rebels, an undocumented uprising within the period of Malagasy socialism. Nevertheless, it was much easier for her to speak French than Malagasy, much easier to work with Americans and indeed with Malagasy allies from the upper class like herself. As she remarked, “Most of them have never been in a forest, and privately recoil at the thought of living near one. . . . Most of them haven’t lived in a village either.”³⁶

The problem is that she was working within an economy that not only privileges some over others but favors particular life narrative modes as well. While her form of diary writing arguably opened spaces for the presence of local people and animals, the terms of trade when she wished to publish them were more restrictive. The first, *A World Like Our Own: Man and Nature in Madagascar*, was published by Yale University Press, from a trip funded by the World Wildlife Fund. Although a serious, ecologically conceived portrait of the country, the coffee-table format, with photographs by American nature photographer Russ Kinne and a sunlit ringtail on the book jacket, suggests a Northern/American “us” in opposition to a Southern/Malagasy “them” perspective. This popular presentation ironically also reflected the preference of the anticolonial government, which had refused all scientists’ visas to the country (Mum got in as a tourist).

Her second autobiographical book, *Lords & Lemurs: Mad Scientists, Kings with Spears, and the Survival of Diversity in Madagascar*, moves on in terminology and conception, but the backstory shows the trouble of managing the American market as much as my mother’s relationship to Madagascar. Yale and Harvard refused the manuscript, describing her historiography as too complex and the region too remote for readers. Further, one reviewer

thought Mum too sympathetic to the French family that owns the Berenty reserve.³⁷ Houghton Mifflin eventually took it—the same publishers who had done Dian Fossey’s memoir—and it came out with an elegant jacket design of ringtails on a wall at Berenty. However, they were disappointed that there were proportionately few animal stories in the book, and it did not sell well.

Thank You, Madagascar again proved challenging to market. Houghton Mifflin wanted something more lemur-tailey; Yale and Harvard more academic. A Yale editor proposed a guiding structure under the concept of “Saving Madagascar.” Mum took this advice, and the manuscript was almost finished at the time she became mortally ill. At the very last, a friend suggested a smaller publisher who specialized in development studies, Zed Books. Sadly, Mum died before she could see how wonderfully this turned out. However, it was for me to experience the terms, even with Zed, under which such narratives must operate. Though I managed to change “Saving” to *Thank You*, I had to insist we include photographs of people and places as well as animals and was riled when their cover design—Mum and the ringtails again—cropped the photo so that the iconic stripy tail was missing. And then there is the significance of the photograph itself: that “contact” story again—the magical transcendence of species boundaries with that gaze of Mum to lemurs.

These publishers also wanted a more obviously feminist plot. Despite Mum’s impressive achievements, she did not identify as feminist in name. Neither did she write overtly about managing domestic labor or mothering.³⁸ *A World Like Our Own* was Mum’s trip to Madagascar in 1975, the only time she took all four of us kids. I was ten, the oldest. The challenges were eased by my father coming along, working in Madagascar’s government planning office.³⁹ We lived in the capital’s zoo, next to the director, George Randrianamsolo, an ornithologist, which I chiefly remember for his children and their pet lemur. Later, she drove us down south, wrestling a wounded sifaka en route from tribesmen who tried to sell it to us.

We kids were put into a tiny all-American Lutheran missionary school for a couple of months so Mum could travel to other parts of the country. We put the ailing sifaka in the tree outside, but it died. But very little of this is described.

I urged Mum to make the last book more autobiographical. But she wouldn't. It was in two small notebooks, marked for me to consider after her death, that I found a "personal" story, which revealed her difficult balancing acts, especially when our family moved from a small English town to New York in 1982 to support my father's work at the United Nations. The first appears to have been instigated as a wish to capture the new life. An account of 1983 records her New Year's resolutions: "To say I like New York, when asked. To be a great hostess. To be honest, when talking, particularly about life being romantic and reality melodrama." A decade later, she included this reflection: "I brought up the kids as I wanted to be—with freedom and excitement and little nagging about rules and appearance. Clearly this was wrong. But how wrong? Should I not have done what I did about career? Or tried to make NYC more of a home? Or what?" Her resolutions for 1992 included "Not to moan about the empty nest." Reading these very different kinds of diaries sparked a powerful identification for me, suddenly seeing Mum as a woman in her forties, doing well at her career, trying to please her own mother. But are these "personal" diaries truer, the hidden Mum? Surely not. Rather, the public voice of her "Mad" diaries that became *Thank You, Madagascar*, and which she so wanted published, is quite simply her preferred self, her alter ego, released into the life of Madagascar. As she once put it, "If sex evolved so that your children are not condemned to be just like you, intelligence evolved so that you are not condemned to be just like yourself."⁴⁰ Ironically, this is not necessarily as easy to sell.

Companion Species and Animal Life Writing

Life narrative in the Chthulucene must move from celebrating the agency and spirit of humanism to embody posthuman interdependency and ethics. Whitlock specifically proposes that the white woman in Africa must find an inside-out Deleuzian form that can represent the tragic inevitability of guilt, belatedness, the imperative of hearing and remediating testimonies that she is ill-equipped to understand.⁴¹ But my mother did not write the kind of literary political apology that Whitlock champions in Antjie Krog or J. M. Coetzee. And even if she had, few of these books would be read by those in Madagascar, beginning with the simple question of language. Nevertheless, she sought a life-narrative form that in its way also refused the competitive terms of animal versus human faces and indeed, lives and deaths.

Mum's diary writing conveyed a literary education, and some of its comedy of manners reflects her never-failing enjoyment of human as well as animal drama. But it was founded in an ecological principle of the interrelationships of species. Perhaps most symbolically, she displaces the "first contact" motif of primatologist to primate by relishing many contacts, hands, and gazes. Of the aye aye, for example, whose hands she describes as strange "bunches of knobbed licorice sticks," she remembers watching "for about 40 minutes, hiccupping with excitement while it scraped the nut meat out with flickering finger just as it's supposed to. . . . They feel everything, like raccoons, not at all like a lemur. Their minds must be as different as their looks."⁴² Of the indri, she observes, "They don't eat like lemurs, and they don't move like leaf eaters. Indriids loll among the branches, languidly stretching out a hand to nibble a leaf-tip like furry Madame Récamiers."⁴³

Rather than simple anthropomorphism, Mum's sharp observations recall her founding argument that primate hands expressed social intelligence. An observation of ringtails underlines this as an element of possible cross-species identification: "The mother put her arm around Domino to adjust his position. The baby cradled inside the crook of her forearm and elbow just as a human baby would. Of course, it is primate to hold things with open hand and

arm, not with the inturned forelimb of the terrestrial quadruped. It is just another example of the gesture, the trick of movement, which can persist across evolutionary time and species distance as surely as the molding of bones and perhaps even the bases of emotion.”⁴⁴

Image 2 Ringtail mother and baby, 2005, one of mum's favourite photographs, courtesy Cyril Ruoso

Mum’s diaries prove Linda Fedigan’s argument that women do not go into primatology because they like “big brown eyes.”⁴⁵ My mother’s real interest was to discover ways that competitive species coexist and indeed cooperate. Notably, she also connected with Japanese primatologists whose tradition has always valued both the subjective and the sociological in science. A close reading of the diaries reveals the significance of human handshaking: she describes that of the president of the World Bank as “a flowing motion from right to left that keeps the traffic going.”⁴⁶

I now see my mother as part of a movement of life narrators who seek to respond to environmental crisis by trying to recognize the worlds of other species without simply extending human models of personhood, yet acknowledging where biology underlies relationships. This arguably includes Donna Haraway herself. Haraway’s long footnote in *When Species Meet* plainly confessed her new appreciation of the radical element of biology: “When I wrote *Primate Visions* . . . I was so intent on the consequences of the Western philosophical, literary and political heritage for writing about animals—especially other primates in the so-called third world in a period of rapid decolonization and gender rearrangements—that I all but missed the radical practice of many of the biologists and anthropologists . . . who helped me with the book, that is, their relentless curiosity about the animals and their tying themselves into knots to find ways to engage with these diverse animals as rigorous scientific practice and not a romantic fantasy.”⁴⁷

Amusingly, this turn to the study of species companionship came out of an epiphanic touch of hands, when Haraway shook the paw of her Australian Shepherd dog. While some

might see Donna as getting too cozy, Mum would have described this as more proof of social intelligence.

Image 3 Donna Haraway with Cayenne 2006, courtesy Rusten Hogness

Evidently, the challenges are ongoing. Hands and faces are too easily drawn not only into the life-narrative market, but into an evolutionary competition too, where the suffering of baby-faced dogs and cats is always easier to bear than that of distant human villagers. Conversely, celebrity animal selfies or even animalographies that ignore the biological frame of a species' subjectivity make horribly plain the limits of many animal rights paradigms.⁴⁸ As Cynthia Huff explains in the introduction to this issue, the human tendency to privilege sight as the dominant sense is itself implicated here: how could we tell the stories of our relationships with lemurs, for example, in ways that captured their conversation by scent as well as by touch? Life narrative can and must do its job to stimulate compassion for those who struggle for survival. But it will not be innocent. Confessing frankly that she had found it easier to write about lemurs than people, my mother mused, "The personal, whether my life or [lemur] Frightful Fan's life, or Jean de Heaulme's life, or Valiotaky's grand funeral for his brother, or a student's tears over the death of a lemur baby, are notes for a private or public diary. The public diary is a literary construction. Like all literature, it hopes to stir feelings, to seek depths of understanding with a nimbus of connotations which spread into surrounding worlds of the reader's mind. It may have an ulterior goal: to press for a cause like conservation, or to convey the richness of another culture. It may even be an attempt to show the limitations of a supposedly scientific account of a culture, and how few people, with what mixed motives, are actually involved. But if it is not set in a wider context than its own story, it is literary propaganda, for good or for bad."⁴⁹

This again underlines Mum's use of diary writing as a testimonial resource rather than the means by which she managed secrets or the domestic life of so many women's diaries, nor

even the kind of neoromantic psychogeography of contemporary nature writing. Never under the illusion that her writing was uncrafted, she certainly edited “after the fact” to enhance her “ulterior goal” of conservation, while conveying how few people and with what mixed motives, have often been involved in the fate of lives in Madagascar.⁵⁰ Yet the diary was also the vital, date-driven form in which she “took up the challenge of time,” time that was running out for her as well as for Madagascar.⁵¹

Mum and Donna: The Consolation of Ecology

My mother concluded that science, based on collective, coherent observation, could provide a wider and more encompassing narrative than life writing. Yet her turn to more personalized modes expressed her equal instinct to make visible and accessible the lives at stake in the troop, the political group. Here, as in Haraway’s late writings, differences dissolve, as surely they should for all who love the earth. Imagining the larger life story of the Chthulucene will condition our common survival in whatever form. A different way of understanding this is to ask what the dead are trying to tell us. Donna proposes that “one way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition”: “There are so many losses already, and there will be many more. Renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct.”⁵²

For me, inevitably, this is an immediate command. My mother tells me to keep the story going, keep witnessing in my distant human-centered way. She gives me her hand in her handwriting, in the warm squeeze of her empty gloves, in the Malagasy bracelet on my wrist. And of course most of all in her bequest of the diaries and the book they became. Nancy K.

Miller names my experiences in her study of childless children who find a kind of progeny in writing memoirs of parents. For her, for all its awkwardness and sometimes betrayal, this is a creativity like none quite other.

Donna goes much further in making childlessness a prescription to humankind whose far too successful reproduction is bringing such dire consequences for nonhuman species. Make kin, not babies! To obey would certainly transform the human-centered family plots of so many life narratives. This idea brings its own consolation despite the sociobiological pain that Mum would certainly have predicted. We don't have to be alone in childlessness, in speciesness, any more than in writing about the dead. But we do have to make common cause.

We here can join with the dead in the most radical way, more radical even than African humanism, which more readily connects the living and the dead, the animal and the human.⁵³ Donna tells us that "The task of the Speaker for the Dead is to bring the dead into the present, so as to make more response-able living and dying possible in times yet to come. . . . The practice of the arts of memory enfold all terran critters. That must be part of any possibility for resurgence!"⁵⁴

How my mother, who wanted no gravestone but the grass, would enjoy Donna's cheerful confidence that for multispecies survival in the Chthulucene, personal inheritance is everybody's inheritance.

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Notes

¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 60.

² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 82–85. Information on The Ako Project at <http://www.lemurreserve.org/ako-project> See also Margaretta Jolly, "Alison Jolly and Hantanirina Rasamimanana: The Story of a Friendship," *Madagascar Conservation & Development* 5, no. 2 (2010): 125–126.

³ Alison Jolly and Margaretta Jolly, "A View from the Other End of the Telescope," *New Scientist* (1990): 58.

⁴ Alison Jolly, "Female Biology and Women Biologists," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 6, no. 2 (1991): 39–40.

⁵ Alison Jolly, "The Narrator's Stance: Story-Telling and Science at Berenty Reserve," in *Centralizing Fieldwork: Critical Perspectives from Primatology, Biological and Social Anthropology*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy and Agustín Fuentes (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 227.

⁶ Alison Jolly, "Lemur Social Behavior and Primate Intelligence," *Science* 153, no. 3735 (1966): 506.

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⁸ Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest & Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xii.

⁹ “How Do Diaries End?” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 99–112.

¹⁰ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar: The Conservation Diaries of Alison Jolly* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 370.

¹¹ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 38.

¹² Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 38.

¹³ Richard, Alison. *Thank You, Madagascar* book launch, Unicef, New York, April 28 2015. Presentation.

¹⁴ *Lords and Lemurs: Mad Scientists, Kings with Spears, and the Survival of Diversity in Madagascar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004, 103–120; 321.

¹⁵ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Madagascar-Ben-Stiller/dp/B00FYOLXC6>

¹⁶ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 221.

¹⁷ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 222.

¹⁸ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 75.

¹⁹ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 77.

²⁰ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 43–57.

²¹ The New York Zoological Society changed its name in 1993 to the Wildlife Conservation Society.

²² Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 345–346.

²³ See Keith Bezanson, Léon Rajaobalena, and Jacques Gérin, *End of Mission Report by the Independent International Advisory Panel* (Tôlanaro: The Rio Tinto Ilmenite Project in Southeastern Madagascar, 2016). Available at:

https://www.riotinto.com/documents/RT_QMM_IAP_EOM_Report_Feb_2016_EN.pdf

²⁴ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar: The Conservation Diaries of Alison Jolly* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 338.

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- ²⁶ Gillian Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 107–135.
- ²⁷ Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives*, 123–125.
- ²⁸ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 135.
- ²⁹ Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives*, 120.
- ³⁰ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 268–275.
- ³¹ Alison Jolly, *A World Like Our Own: Man and Nature in Madagascar* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 204–214.
- ³² Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 274.
- ³³ Alison Jolly, *A World Like Our Own* xv.
- ³⁴ Catherine A. Corson, *Corridors of Power: The Politics of Environmental Aid to Madagascar* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 82–87.
- ³⁵ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 279–280.
- ³⁶ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 116.
- ³⁷ A. Jolly, “The Narrator’s Stance.”
- ³⁸ This context is gleanable from the Alison Jolly Papers, 8517, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library,
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- ⁴⁰ Alison Jolly, *Lucy’s Legacy: Sex and Intelligence in Human Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 62.
- ⁴¹ Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives*, 100.
- ⁴² A. Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 60.

⁴³ A. Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 155.

⁴⁴ A. Jolly, *A World Like Our Own*, 202.

⁴⁵ Linda Marie Fedigan, “Is Primatology a Feminist Science?” in *Women in Human Evolution*, ed. Lori D. Hager (New York: Routledge, 1997), 67.

⁴⁶ Alison Jolly, *Thank You, Madagascar*, 131.

⁴⁷ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 312.

⁴⁸ Cynthia Huff and Joel Haefner, “His Master’s Voice: Animalographies, Life Writing, and the Posthuman,” *Biography* 35, no. 1 (2012): 261.

⁴⁹ A. Jolly, “The Narrator’s Stance,” 239.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lejeune, 173. “Composing a Diary.” In *On Diary*, edited by Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, 168–174

⁵² Donna Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin* (160–161)

⁵³ Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives*, 202–203.

⁵⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 69.